Reproducing the political class: how socialisation makes MPs more loyal to their parties

What are the drivers of party discipline in the House of Commons? Evidence from survey data suggests that the socialisation process of new MPs as they learn from colleagues is a key factor in their subsequent loyalty, writes **Nicholas Dickinson**.

MPs in Central Lobby, Parliament. Picture: UK Parliament/Parliamentary copyright

We elect politicians to represent us, and for most aspiring MPs the desire to serve the public is a key motivating factor. Yet, once in parliament, even the more idealistic tend to become members of the 'political class'. Embedded in Westminster's world, the political class develops a detachment from the worries of their constituents. Instead, they are concerned mainly with defending the institution and gaining advantage for their parties, to whom they show a slavish loyalty.

This is a relatively common description of the maladies of British representative democracy today, both on the left and the right of the political spectrum. But how far is it accurate? Do politicians' attitudes to representation and party loyalty really change after they are elected to parliament? In a recent article for *Parliamentary Affairs*, I argue that the answer is sometimes yes – but not for the reasons which have been commonly understood.

Like legislators in most countries, British MPs are indeed highly loyal to their parties. With notable exceptions, most UK parliamentarians reliably vote according to their leadership's instructions. The extensive literature on party cohesion shows that a number of factors contribute to this, from disciplining mechanisms, to the hope of ministerial promotion, through to simple agreement on policy questions resulting from screening and selection processes.

Yet such direct incentives are not always effective. MPs do not all seek ministerial office, or respond to discipline, and screening cannot be completely effective while selection remains decentralised. Consequently, parties also try to instil their MPs with strong social norms of loyalty to the party. This process is known as parliamentary socialisation.

While socialisation has often been suggested as important for explaining party loyalty, much less is known about precisely how the process works. Once elected, politicians are thrust into an unfamiliar environment where they must deal with a new and confusing work culture, dominated above all by partisanship. Qualitative evidence thus frequently suggests a link between early experiences of new members and the development of deference to senior colleagues. As one study of new MPs at Westminster put it:

> [some] remembered the experience as… comparable to starting at a new boarding school… not only the atmosphere and surroundings, but also the rules in place and the sense of hierarchy that exists between the new arrivals and the more established Members.

Date originally posted: 2018-06-14

Permalink: https://www.democraticaudit.com/2018/06/14/reproducing-the-political-class-how-socialisation-makes-mps-more-loyal-to-their-parties/

Blog homepage: https://www.democraticaudit.com/

Taking a different approach, quantitative work on socialisation has sought to link loyalty to length of legislative tenure – the amount of time an MP has been in parliament. However, these efforts have tended to prove inconclusive. Though it seems clear that MPs' loyalty norms are increasingly important for cohesion the longer an MP sits in parliament, studies tend to attribute differences in these norms to party identification and not tenure.

In my recent work for *Parliamentary Affairs*, therefore, I develop a model for parliamentary socialisation that moves away from the tenure framework. Taking inspiration from qualitative studies, and a famous sociological account of workplace socialisation as a form of social exchange, the paper posits that parliamentary socialisation occurs as result of the way new members seek information about how to do their jobs.

As well as being crucial for day-to-day effectiveness, the possession of knowledge about institutional practices is the most important marker of 'insider' status. Proactive information seeking is therefore central to the socialisation process. To obtain such 'insider' information, newcomers rely on receiving advice from established insiders. Yet because they have few resources with which to 'pay back' these senior members in the short term, they reciprocate instead by developing bonds of loyalty to colleagues from who they have received valuable advice and information.

To test the model, I used data from the Study of Parliament Group's (SPG) surveys of the 1992 and 1997 cohorts of new MPs in the House of Commons. The SPG surveys are unique in their attention to MPs' socialisation experiences, including satisfaction with advice received from various sources. The SPG also recorded how loyal to party leadership and knowledgeable about parliament MPs rated themselves before, during and at the end of their first term in parliament.

As predicted by the information–advice model, results showed that members who were more satisfied with advice from senior party actors were indeed more loyal. The SPG data reveal that by the end of their first parliamentary term an MP who consistently rated party advice as 'very useful' was almost three times as likely to report high levels of party loyalty than one who only rated advice as 'quite useful'. Conversely, an MP who consistently rated party advice as not at all useful was most likely to report a low level of loyalty after several years as an MP.

MPs satisfied with party advice also rated themselves as significantly more knowledgeable about parliamentary procedure, suggesting that MPs were indeed receiving valuable information from senior colleagues. These results held even when controlling for initial levels of loyalty, as well as other factors such as government status, ministerial ambitions and party identification.

In line with the stereotype of the political class, this evidence suggests that MPs can become socialised into norms of party loyalty. While this is often viewed critically, however, the mechanism revealed here indicates that this does not occur because of naked careerism or disconnection from the concerns of constituents. Instead, precisely as a consequence of the learning process involved in becoming an effective representative, MPs develop social bonds with senior members of the party, which in turn bolsters their sense of loyalty to the group. To the extent that socialisation reproduces the political class, therefore, we would do well to reflect on its benefits as well as its perils.

This article gives the views of the author, not the position of Democratic Audit. It draws on the author's article 'Advice Giving and Party Loyalty: an Informational Model for the Socialisation Process of New British MPs' published in Parliamentary Affairs.

About the author

Nicholas Dickinson is PhD student in politics at the University of Exeter. His doctoral research focuses on the regulation of parliamentary salaries and expenses. He completed a BA in History and Politics at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in 2013 and a masters (Mst.) in Modern British & European History the following year. He came to Exeter in autumn 2015 and completed a masters (MRes) in Politics, staring his doctoral research in autumn 2016. Tweets at @NickSDickinson.

Date originally posted: 2018-06-14

Permalink: https://www.democraticaudit.com/2018/06/14/reproducing-the-political-class-how-socialisation-makes-mps-more-loyal-to-their-parties/

Blog homepage: https://www.democraticaudit.com/

Similar Posts

- Why do we care what our politicians get paid?
- How the partisan context of parliamentary votes affects MPs' party loyalty on free votes
- 20 things we learned about democracy in July 2014
- How Private Members' legislation improved local government social value
- Book Review | Dramas at Westminster: Select Committees and the Quest for Accountability by Marc Geddes

Date originally posted: 2018-06-14

Permalink: https://www.democraticaudit.com/2018/06/14/reproducing-the-political-class-how-socialisation-makes-mps-more-loyal-to-their-parties/

Blog homepage: https://www.democraticaudit.com/